

Tutorial 281

Chapter 281: That would suck

I wonder how much my subclass affects my control over my mana, and even over my black mana.

Sure, it's obvious that it helps, but my inability to measure it properly frustrates me. Is the effect stronger the more prideful I am? Is acting cocky boosting my control?

As always, the system likes to hide such information, and having had the subclass for months already, I find it hard to compare it to my prior efforts. The only obvious effect it has is on my mana constructs. My armor looks nice; the weapons seem well made too.

Great.

I look down at my arm as I finish drawing a set of temporary inscriptions made with mana conductive paint and etching them into my skin. It's sort of a single-use temporary construct. Sort of. If I'm doing it properly, it should help me with the black mana.

I've been working on examining the black mana and trying to come up with a way to reduce the strain it puts on my body the moment I try to use it. I have multiple ideas, and one of them is changing the frequency of black mana to match mine. The problem here is that it changes constantly; that's why I've created these inscriptions.

The inscriptions should help me with that, automating the process so I can focus on the rest. I already tried it a few times with tiny bits of black mana and so far it's good, but I will know more after I scale things up.

I've more or less optimized them to fortify my body with black mana. Logically, strengthening my body with black mana and then using more for something else should work, but I'm sure the strengthening itself will strain my body. Even though it won't affect me immediately, I'm sure it will be immense.

That's why I'll offset it with my healing passive. I've already cut off my pinkie, and it grew back after a few hours of generating thermal energy and sending it to the stump.

It's not as good as Lily's healing, but I can't be picky, and I'm happy to even get that much, given how often I tend to lose my limbs.

Master, I'm done, Vega breathes heavily, and I remove the strain I've put on her with [Redistribution].

I'm making it harder for her to move just as Min-Jae did for me in an effort to strengthen her body. We also spend some of this time practicing some of the moves I learned back on Earth.

Having been released, she plops down next to me and examines the inscriptions covering my arms. I feel her senses examining it and allow her to do so.

When will we reach the place you mentioned? she asks.

Sometime tomorrow. There is no need to hurry.

Vega nods, I already learned the crotch kick, master showed me. The one against people that touch me without my consent! she chirps innocently.

Good job, how about a mana orb?

Just really small ones, but I'm putting a lot of my stats into mana as master told me!

Good, it's all coming together! The goal is simple: to make her build similar to mine. Just the fact I have reached Beyond with it shows how versatile it is, and most of the monsters, other than end bosses, don't really cause me any problems.

I also want to let master know something about my trait, she starts carefully, I wanted to keep it to myself, just in case, and master never asked so I didn't lie.

When I gesture at her to continue, she breathes out in relief, A lot of demons and some half-demons are born with one trait. I heard there are some humans too, but I don't know why.

Huh, even humans? Werent they limited to three traits? Are humans on her planet different, is there something else? Are they born with traits they cant pick themselves?

I think most of the demons start with their demon heart, she says, I have one too. Everyone has a different one.

What is a demon heart?

The system calls mine a kinetic demon heart. It's weak and I was never really able to use it.

Okay, is the system playing favorites here? First, humans start with 3 traits only, then there are some demons with 4 and some more ancient bloodlines with 5? And how is she even alive with a kinetic heart?

Minion, how are you not dead?

My name is Vega, master, she says proudly, Im too weak to use it, and I think it's one of the weaker hearts.

I call bullshit; there is no way a kinetic mana heart or kinetic demon heart is weak. I made my own and it's not a trait, so Im sure it doesnt reach the system standards, it should be weaker than any trait would be. It's annoying, but it would be straight-up silly if 3rd-floor Nathaniel managed to replicate a trait at full power. I mean, I like that weirdo and all, but I need to be realistic.

As for the heart not generating kinetic energy and killing my disciple, well, that much could be explained by it being a trait as well. Unlike my own experimental and janky version, hers would be made by the system so it wouldnt make any sense if it killed her.

The other reason could be her low level.

Minion

Its Vega.

Starting now, you ditch everything other than practicing [Mana Manipulation] at night. Spend the rest of your days trying to use your Kinetic Demon heart.

Yes! she says eagerly, and then hesitates, But how?

How indeed.

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I let my own heart generate some kinetic energy and then gesture for my disciple to turn around. Sitting in front of me, she turns her back to me and I put my hand on it, somewhere behind where her heart should be.

She is still low level, so even with her natural barrier trying to stop me from affecting her, its not hard for me to send the tiniest trickle of kinetic energy to her heart. Focusing on it, I can sense the movement of her lungs, heart, and other organs through their kinetic energy.

When I finally reach her heart, It seems to change its rhythm, as a bit more mana radiates from it.

My disciple doesnt say anything as she concentrates and examines it with me.

I send a few weak pulses of kinetic energy to her heart, and after each one, its rhythm changes and takes in slightly more mana. I stop there. She should figure out the rest on her own. She needs to use her own head and effort. Otherwise, she might grow too reliant on me.

Vega doesn't even react to me and continues to sit there, her eyes closed and focused on her heart.

Just in case, I place an anchor nearby and use [Perception] to keep an eye on her.

The building we are currently staying in is one of the tallest in the city and offers a sprawling view of the landscape. The top floor has no windows, and yet the vines reach even extends here. As always, most of the furniture is broken and rotted away, but I don't mind it that much and just move towards a circular hole in the wall. The edges of this hole are extremely smooth, either caused by a skill or a weapon.

I sit with my legs hanging over the edge and I train in the same fashion as my disciple.

Slowly, I create an orb as big as my pinkie nail, and the orb turns black with specks of lights inside of it. [Mana Domain] encompasses it, and I slide deeper into [Focus].

As always, the black mana tries to fight me, but my trait activates as well, and I gradually force it under my control. Then I reach towards it, and my index finger touches it at the same time the inscriptions on my forearm light up. The black mana orb turns into a liquid or smoke-like substance and flows into my arm. As it does so, the inscriptions change their color, and it grows harder to control, but with such a small amount of mana, it is doable.

Over a minute, I let the black mana seep into the entirety of my body, and then, when I feel ready, I use it to strengthen my body. One of the first things I ever did with my mana.

It feels different than using normal mana. Much stronger. My muscles twitch and spasm while my passive activates and starts healing me. I concentrate even more and change my approach. [Infusion] activates as well, and I attempt to distribute things more evenly.

[Infusion - lvl 22 > Infusion - lvl 23]

Even then, with the inscriptions to help me, I feel the pressure on my body increase, and over the next few seconds, the black mana dissipates.

After it finally works its way out of my system, I observe the damage and it's nothing to ignore.

I generate a bit more thermal energy and compress it, and the passive intensifies, gradually healing the wounds.

Well, the progress is there, but it will still take some time. I wonder what I'd need to use it without any restriction. A substantial increase in my Constitution? A passive with a rarity above epic, something like Mana Overload Absorption? Strengthening my Mana Circuit trait could help too.

Letting my body heal, I open the Community. As I type, I don't even bother trying to write anything about the dangers of this floor. The system has been extremely aggressive with censorship lately.

Noname (Hell, group 4) - the system didn't lie, disciples are really similar to us.

TheStrongestOne (Hell, group 4) - yes! Mine has nearly the same skills as mine. The way he uses them is strange, so there is a lot for him to learn.

Izzy (Hell, group 4) - mine said she likes my flames. She also tried to eat them.

Soph (Hell, group 4) - Izzy, just stay somewhere safe and train with her. Do not risk anything, okay?

Izzy (Hell, group 4) - yah, yah (>_<)

TheStrongestOne (Hell, group 4) - how is yours, Noname?

Noname (Hell, group 4) - She has similar skills and fights like me. Same as yours, there is a lot for her to learn, but the most important part is that she actually wants to and has a lot of enthusiasm.

TheStrongestOne (Hell, group 4) - not gonna lie, she sounds scary.

NotAaron (Hell, group 4) - I bet in a few weeks she could beat your ass, TheStrongestOne.

NotDennis (Hell, group 4) - Yeah, if she is even a bit like Noname, lol.

Noname (Hell, group 4) - Did you find out what happened to your disciples before they got summoned?

Sset (Hell, group 4) - Hello, Noname and everyone else. It's nice to see that you are here at the scheduled time. As for you, Noname, so far we've come to think that the disciples were close to death before they got summoned.

NotDennis (Hell, group 4) - Mine was about to be eaten by some monster.

Izzy (Hell, group 4) - Mine too! She said some group attacked her village.

Knight (Hell, group 4) - Sorry for being late! Mine almost died as well; he got attacked and beaten by some noble asshole.

Maya finally joins as well.

Grumpy (Hell, group 4) - I had to heal mine; he was close to bleeding out.

Looking at what they are saying, I think I will have to ask my disciple as well.

Noname (Hell, group 4) - Do you think they are real? The system said they were taken from a database.

Sset (Hell, group 4) - I wouldn't be surprised if the system constantly updates that database, so they could easily be real. But that's something we can't say for sure for now.

Izzy (Hell, group 4) - I don't want mine to be fake.

NotAaron (Hell, group 4) - That would suck

Noname (Hell, group 4) - Got to go, later.

I use an anchor to reappear next to Vega, just in time to grab her and stop her from hitting her head against the floor as she passes out. She is unconscious and breathing heavily. There is barely any mana left in her body, and she has a few wounds under her skin.

Her heart is beating differently now, like that of a small bird.

Piercing through her natural barrier, I reach towards it and absorb some of its energy, carefully slowing the pace down to a normal level. For a few minutes, I help it beat until it feels right and release my hold.

The young half-demon in my arms calms down as well, and the pained expression gradually disappears from her face.

Reflexively, she moves in her sleep and her small hands grab the hem of my clothes, pulling herself closer to me like a small animal looking for safety and warmth.

This time, I agree with Aaron. It would really suck if the disciples were fake.

Chapter 282: Darren and Nina

Master?

Yes, minion?

Do we really have to meet these people? Were ok by ourselves.

Can you be proud of someone just for trying to be antisocial? Because damn, I am.

I'm already mentally preparing for having to deal with people. This time I'm severely weakened. There aren't any extroverted members of Group 4 here to absorb most of the damage or who have a good match-up against extroverts.

Nope, this time it's just me and my disciple who seem to have the same problem.

All of this is compounded by the fact that we've already spent over a week by ourselves, and neither of us speaks very much. That leaves 2 weeks left with my silly disciple and to maybe finish the side quests.

Locating the natives or survivors, as the system calls them in the side quests, should be the easiest one and maybe they can help me locate the Mirror. The reward for that one is listed as a series of question marks, and that interests me greatly.

Together we reach the part of the city where Darren told us to meet him, so I sit on a chunk of debris and, after observing me for a moment, my disciple does the same. She even mimics my expression and then we wait.

Straight away, I notice a dozen or so people surrounding us. None of them feels close to 200 and they don't think I've noticed them yet. They proceed to carefully examine me. Not exactly me, they seem to be trying to sense how much mana I'm passively radiating and try to estimate my strength that way.

As always, I keep Mana Cycling running. Ever since Lissandra taught me, I've kept it up almost constantly. In combination with my Mantle, it almost fully stops the leak of my mana and it also constantly improves my control, even as my reserves grow.

In an attempt to avoid spooking them too much, I've been letting a bit of mana leak. Too little could seem as suspicious as leaking too much. I'm smart, am I not?

Even my disciple hasn't noticed anything as she's been scanning the area with her delicate senses, but that's fine, we can work on that.

The strongest member of their group uses some weird skill and his voice speaks in my ear even though he hasn't changed position.

Are you the one Darren spoke with? he asks.

I respond, with the password he gave me, Zero, one, three, four.

Only then does he use a skill to step out of the shadow, keeping his distance from me.

He speaks normally this time voice, You are ten minutes late.

[Shadow Whisperer - lvl 167]

We did meet a few veilshriekers on the way here, I answer as I observe him.

The man observes me as well and then nods.

My name is Kaiden, please follow me. This time he whispers again using the weird projection skill and a few more of his group members appear.

My disciple seems to be surprised and might even be thinking about how cool they are, but I have trouble taking them too seriously.

Am I the asshole here? I mean, they probably need to be skilled to survive here, scavenging for food and water while fighting monsters and avoiding the stronger ones like Veil Guardian.

The moment they move, I follow them and when they speed up, I grab Vega and run with her in my arms.

She seems to dislike it, but I also notice that cheeky disciple of mine comfortably resting her head against my chest where my heart is.

Any problem with my heart? I ask.

The group speeds up even more and I use some of my mana to strengthen my body and slow down a bit so I don't pass them. We run through the streets and occasionally hide in a building while we wait for a group of veilshriekers to pass.

Masters heart is strong, Vega says to me.

Is that a good thing?

Yes! Demon Hearts are important to demons and I heard the Hornless Demon has the strongest ever!

Oh really? What does it do?

Her eyes shine at the prospect of telling me about her hero, His heartbeat can be heard throughout the entire world when he gets angry, and only the human's Bloody Hero has ever survived a fight with him!

Oh, that sounds cool.

Yes! she nods and once again listens to my heart, But I think master also has a strong heart, almost like a demon.

Well, let's not tell her that it's only a cheap knock-off version of a trait, that it's terribly inefficient in comparison to traits. And unlike traits, it can kill me much easier.

Minion, I think you have a good heart as well, I tell her and slide deeper into the shadows, waiting for Kaidens signal to continue.

Its Vega, master. She seems to enjoy the compliment.

Kaiden gives the signal and I follow him out of the city.

We quickly move between the trees and he sends a few people to scout ahead. They return after a minute and we continue. We run for a minute longer until we reach a rocky hill and a small passage on the side, which we enter.

The light disappears as we proceed down a passage just wide enough for two people to walk side by side. We continue deeper into the hill and after a few twists and turns, we reach a chamber that appears to be heavily guarded and trapped.

My guides signal the guards and the traps deactivate.

Quickly, Kaiden says, and we pass through the location.

The same thing repeats a few more times until we reach a cave the size of a football stadium. It doesn't seem to be natural, and its walls are extremely smooth, with a giant iron door lodged into the side of it. There are no circuits in it, no mana. It's just a massive chunk of metal and it is currently closed.

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As we move closer, we see a man and woman, surrounded by three guards. Once again I carefully leak some of my mana to avoid spooking them.

Man, that was such a good idea. Nathaniel the sneaky! Nathaniel yet another normal guy with totally normal mana.

Nathaniel, it's nice to meet you, I'm Darren.

Darren has brown hair with a streak of gray in them. He is wearing old clothes like everyone else here, but they're freshly ironed and free of holes. He doesn't have any visible weapons, but his body is muscular and his fists look like those of someone used to punching things.

[Iron Vanguard - lvl 159]

To my surprise, his level is lower than that of Kaiden.

I ignore the fact that there are so many of them surrounding me, Hey, I answer simply.

Vega seems to be less pleased, and I can read it in her expression, even though she's back to acting the way she was when we first met. Big eyes, a slightly scared expression, and making herself as small as possible.

That's my girl.

This is my right hand, Nina. I believe you've spoken with her before, he introduces the woman next to him.

She is younger than him, maybe around thirty. But her expression is similar to Darren's. They might even be relatives. Maybe his daughter? Unlike him, she has two swords on her waist.

[Ethereal Blade - lvl 189]

Interesting, maybe Nina is the real boss here?

So, about my payment for the things I left to you guys, I start.

Yes, we will keep our side of the deal. I also apologize for the trouble with the esteemed healer. She can be

A bit annoying, Nina offers.

We don't talk about her like that, Nina. Darren turns to me again, I would like to invite you inside, he gestures at the door behind him, but we have rules.

Does he not know that talking like that will only make me more curious? Should I force my way in? It wouldn't be that difficult.

The moment I think about that, mana radiates from Darren as if he is preparing for a fight.

It seems to spook Nina and the guards around us, and everyone puts their hands on their weapons and raises up their mana as well.

I dont even bother activating my skills and just look at him. Any problem? I ask.

I he starts, and I notice his hand shaking, but he squeezes it into a fist until it stops. He then shakes his head, Put your weapons away! he orders.

Everyone seems to act confused, but they do as ordered.

Did he read my intentions? Some skill similar to Izzys [Empathy]? That doesnt sound right; I would feel his touch on me. Maybe it's something like Ciphers skill? Some sort of cold reading information collection skill?

I apologize for our rudeness, he carefully searches for his words, even to Nina's surprise.

Its fine.

Thank you. As you said, we still owe you, and we can offer food, maybe a rare item for your help, he gestures, and one of the men steps forward.

He puts down a bag that contains enough dried meat to last an adult man for a few weeks, and there are even some bottles of water. Next to it, he puts down a rare cape that seems to have some kind of camouflage effect.

The way they present them seems to mark them as extremely valuable items, probably a show of goodwill and an attempt at building a relationship.

I would rather ask for information instead if thats okay with you. If you dont want to answer, I can take the items. If they refuse to answer, I will force them to do so. I wont kill anyone or damage their home; theres no need for that. Just a show of power seems to be enough.

To my fascination, Darren seems to read my intention, and even though he tries to hide it, his hand starts shaking again.

How amusing. Now I really want to mess with them. Should I release my mana a bit?

Before I do anything, Darren hurriedly speaks, Yes, we can do that as well, he forces himself to answer calmly.

Nina seems to notice that, and her eyes examine me again. I see her hand sliding closer to her swords.

Do you know anything about the Mirror? I ask.

Darren puts his hand on Nina and stops her from drawing her sword. After another signal, everyone else around does the same.

A long sigh escapes his mouth, The Mirror is a relic of the past and weve been trying to locate it for a long time. The encrypted mana stone you helped us to retrieve did contain information on it, as well as its location.

Oh, lucky me.

So, where is the problem? I ask.

The Mirror is to the north, in the Valley overseen by the Bastion. The way he says it sounds like that should explain everything.

Darren, tell me like I'm five and know nothing about this place. What the hell is the Mirror, what is the Bastion, and what's with the Valley? Keep it simple, okay?

A few of them dont seem to like the way I talk to them, but its not like Im rude.

Just in case, I check my disciple, and she looks at me like I'm some sort of hero. I also notice the way she mirrors my expression, and stance, and even looks around similarly.

Damn it, is this Min-Jae syndrome? Why do these weirdos keep doing this?

Put simply? The Mirror is, as I said, a relic of the past. An item spoken of legends, yet we are unsure of what it does, but it's likely to be an extremely powerful artifact. The Bastion is the most secure place we have knowledge of, the remains of the past with working defensive mechanisms and other things left behind by our ancestors. The Valley is, well, the Valley; it's a place with extremely dense mana radiation. People die just from coming too close to it. No one from us knows more.

Well, thats simple enough.

Okay, we can stay in touch. I just need a map or something to lead me to the Bastion and the Valley.

Darren nods and I feel my mood improving. Damn, I'm getting better and better at dealing with people.

POV Nina

The young man continues speaking with my father, and I do not take my eyes off him, not even for a second. For now, I decide to trust my father and not send the signal to attack.

The man called Nathaniel seems to notice, and when I meet his two differently colored eyes, I feel my body shudder. His stance remains extremely relaxed the entire time. I keep looking for a hint of a battle stance or defensive one, but I see no such thing.

Surrounded by all of us, he doesn't even seem to mind. But the most scary thing is the way he radiates his mana.

I would be less scared if he was radiating it in waves strong enough to drown me, or if I couldn't sense it at all.

No, what hes doing is much more terrifying. The mana leaks from his body in perfect dispersion. The exact same amount of mana radiates from his arm as from his leg, chest, or head.

I can't even fathom the amount of control that requires or the reason he has for doing such a thing.

The little girl by his side seems to be one of the unlucky human mutants, seeing her red eyes and horns, meanwhile her expression matches that of the young man.

When he finally leaves, I feel my body and mind relax and immediately order a few men to make sure he left and left nothing behind.

What happened? I ask my father.

We were lucky, very lucky. Nina, if you ever deal with him in the future, be respectful, be direct, and never attack him first.

Father, explain properly.

I used my [Intuition] a few times, Nina. That person did think about fighting us multiple times and even getting into the Sanctuary. He even noticed my skill and kept thinking about forcing his way into the Sanctuary just for the sake of it. Always a half-step away from actually doing it.

"Do you think he is someone from before the war?"

"I think so. He is strong enough to be of that generation."

Chapter 283: My disciple is the coolest

A few new side quests popped up:

Side quest: Find out what's happening in the Sanctuary

Reward: 1000 shards

Side quest: Help survivors

Reward: 1000 shards

Side quest: Find out the cause of high mana levels in the Valley

Reward: Mid-epic piece of equipment

Side quest: Reach the Bastion

Reward: Food and water supplies

Side quest: Reach level 250

Reward: Body strengthening

Congratulations, you have located the survivors! The moment you confirm, you will receive your rewards - food and water supplies.

Godamnit, the amount of side quests I'm getting is quite something. The rewards also seem unusually nice. The best one obviously is the body strengthening for reaching level 250. Gimme, right now.

Looking at my level, which is currently 217, and with a disciple to take care of, I would be surprised if I was able to reach it during this floor, especially since the leveling speed slowed down. But hey, it's nice to have something to work toward too.

So, the question now is, will I head towards the Valley and Bastion, or stay here and finish some side quests in the area while leveling my disciple and helping survivors? I mean, the time seems to be limited, with only 2 weeks remaining. Suspiciously limited, so I wonder if there are really only 2 weeks left.

I cant really confirm or deny my doubts, I can only wait and see.

Another problem is that in games, you often can leave the quest for later and return to do it after killing the last boss. But this isn't a game. What if I go to the Valley and Bastion and the survivors and Sanctuary get destroyed in the meantime?

The quests clearly say to find out what's happening there, and I don't think the objective would be to locate where all the cute little kittens are coming from or who is stealing all the socks.

Minion, I'm annoyed, I complain.

Are we going back to kill them then?

What!? No!

I'm sorry master, I thought these people annoyed you as well. Do you want to beat them up and leave them alive?

Isn't this little half-demon a bit scary? I mean, she is cute, so I can forgive her for saying that, but she doesn't seem to be joking.

Disciple, I start seriously, you can't kill people for being annoying. Even if you could, there wouldn't be anyone left. As I share my wisdom, she looks at me, eyes wide open, and listens to my words like they're gospel.

Even if they're rude? Don't all strong people kill because of that?

I hesitate for a moment, and she seems to notice that, but I quickly answer before she says something silly, On a scale from 1 to 10, with 10 being super rude, they were only around a 2.

Really?

Yes, didnt you think they were cute when they got scared or seemed like they wanted to fight? I really mean it. I sensed no real threat from them, and they meant us no harm. They just wanted to protect themselves and their friends.

All as I hid my full power with my skillful application of mana. Damn, Im still proud of that.

I dont know Vega says carefully.

Its fine to not know, you will learn. In the end, their primary objective wasnt to hurt us or trick us; they just wanted to protect themselves. You shouldnt trust them, but you can't really fault anyone for that as long as they don't hurt you or your friends.

I think I understand now, master!

Good! As expected of my minion!

Im Vega, not minion.

Anyway, you are getting distracted and your detection slipped up four times during our conversation. Move your mana

Vega falls asleep, barely able to stand at this point. She is bleeding from her nose, her muscles are sore, and theres barely any mana left in her body.

Another round of harsh training is behind us.

Its getting harder for me to force her through such harsh training, but every time I push those feelings away.

My disciple, like me, seems to understand the price of getting stronger and the value of hard work. She pushes herself to the point of injury. However, I'm here, intervening by either disrupting her mana or infusing her with my own to strengthen her.

Im doing it even now.

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Lately, I have also started experimenting with changing my mana to match hers. Its all thanks to my Mana Wavelength Irises and [Resonance]. I know there are dozens of different, more destructive ways I could use [Resonance], but lately, Ive found myself experimenting with changing mana frequencies.

So, I did that with my own mana and tried to match it to Vegas before I infused her body with it in an effort to alleviate her pain and keep her strengthened for quicker healing. Its more difficult than expected, and I think Im still missing something even with my eyes, but it is a step forward.

Using [Resonance] this way feels weirdly rewarding and comfortable, and I think it's similar to Sophie's situation.

Sophie has a skill called [Manipulation], and its clearly one of the most powerful skills in group 4. It should allow her to manipulate mana, fire, water, stone, heck, maybe even manipulate time or Primordial energies at a higher level. Yet, Sophie herself confirmed that she feels strongest when shes using it to manipulate monsters or other beings, such as humans. She is still capable of manipulating other stuff, but that is not where her skills strength lies.

Its the same case with me and [Resonance], or the twins with [Connection], it should do more than allow us to communicate through their link.

Once Vega recovers, I stop infusing her body and leave a few mana orbs and an anchor nearby, just in case someone attacks. Then I move a bit further so I won't kill her with a sudden burst of mana.

Once again, I create a small orb that I [Focus] and compress until it becomes pitch black, even darker than the surrounding night in the forest where we camp sheltered by trees.

As always, it fights against me, trying to dominate and absorb more of my mana, but I use inscriptions on my right arm to help me with the process and absorb it into my body. I control it, force it under my will, and activate the inscriptions. My trait activates, and I see that hidden and beautiful world full of

mana. In combination with [Focus], the world has been reduced to shades of black and white enveloped in a deathly quiet, and the only color comes in vibrant shades of mana.

Then I create a dagger with [Regalia] and use black mana to make the dagger even stronger.

For a moment, the dagger in my hand starts to compress, changing, not into a blade of black mana that absorbs all other mana, no, this is something else.

The next moment, the dagger explodes.

My right arm is deeply gouged, as shards of the exploded dagger cut through flesh and bone. The explosion strips skin and flesh from my arm, mangling it, and nearly tearing it off.

As I look at the piece of flesh and bone that remains, I wonder what happened. Was it too strong? It shouldn't be, right? I already made an orb and other stuff made of only black mana, so using it to power [Regalia] shouldn't cause that, right? It should only create a stronger version of it.

I send my mana into my heart, and it starts beating louder, working as a medium and turning my mana into thermal energy. That activates my passive, and a warm feeling fills my arm, slowly restoring it.

It will take at least a few hours to restore it, unfortunately.

Soft steps sound behind me, and knowing about them, I warn my disciple, Don't come too close, you will get hurt.

The amount of thermal energy I'm releasing is enough to burn her alive at her level. Sure, I'm controlling it and trying to keep as much inside of my body as I can, but I'm not going to test it. The little half-demon nods and sits in place. Her eyes are on the mangled and bloodied remains of my right arm.

Does it hurt? she asks.

Quite a bit, I nod.

She then tests me, Why are you doing it when it hurts?

Cheeky little thing.

I still answer her honestly, Both of us know why.

Master is as dumb as I am, she nods profoundly.

Look, there are better words for it, maybe determined.

Dumb.

Or decisive, and resolute.

Master is dumb. The same as me.

Goddamnit.

Listen here, you little jerk. Aren't you getting too cheeky lately?

I do it only because master prefers for me to be honest, she says shamelessly. For a moment, I could swear I saw a smug smile cross her face.

She is not wrong, but why am I getting bullied here?

I activate [Redistribution] and grab hold of her, not allowing her to move. You seem to have healed a bit, so strengthen your body and escape my hold, or try to fight against it.

I don't use much mana in an effort to make it remotely possible for her, You can apologize for calling me dumb, and I will let you go, you dumbass minion.

She tries to say something, but she cant because my skill wont allow her to do so.

Oh sorry, I didnt realize that, I tease her, Just blink three times quickly in a row, and I will let you go. Then I continue healing my arm while examining the thermal energy doing so.

Vega doesnt blink three times in a row, and by the time morning comes, she strengthens her body enough to escape my skill. Due to the pressure I'm putting on her, she cracks a few bones and bruises her body, but even that doesn't stop her.

Noname (Hell, group 4) - My disciple is the coolest.

Izzy (Hell, group 4) - No! Seneca is the coolest!

Noname (Hell, group 4) - Nah, Vega would wipe the floor with your Seneca. She is cool as heck.

Knight (Hell, group 4) - My disciple is really good too! Hes from a royal family or something, so I have him teaching me some of the basic swordsmanship they drilled into him.

TheStrongestOne (Hell, group 4) - Noname, only one month left until the tournament! Are you excited too?

NotAaron (Hell, group 4) - Isnt that a dumb question? Im sure hes already prepared to mess up Savant.

TheStrongestOne (Hell, group 4) - Oh, that's true. Savant and that other guy, Gareth, are probably super strong. But other than them, I will make sure to beat everyone! Well maybe not Sset and Grumpy

Knight (Hell, group 4) - That's cheeky of you, boy. Are you sure you could even beat me? I got quite a bit stronger.

Maya starts teasing Min-Jae, and I already know it won't end well for the boy.

TheStrongestOne (Hell, group 4) - Ha! You have no chance! I can control my eye much better. I'm sorry, but you are going down.

NotDennis (Hell, group 4) - Damn, Knight, are you going to let him talk to you like that?

NotAaron (Hell, group 4) - Maybe shes scared of him.

Both of the twins try to add fuel to the fire.

Knight (Hell, group 4) - And how would you defeat me, oh, TheStrongestOne? By staring at my cleavage when you think I'm not looking?

Min-Jae immediately stops responding.

Nice attack, Maya, calculating and knowing where it will hurt the shy boy the most.

Knight (Hell, group 4) - Next you will say something about community limit and leave.

TheStrongestOne (Hell, group 4) - I have to go, community limit!

The messages appear a split second apart.

Damn, that's brutal, I almost feel sorry for the boy.

NotDennis (Hell, group 4) - Brutal.

NotAaron (Hell, group 4) - Knight, please stop, he is already dead.

After that, no messages come from the young boy.

I turn off the Community and look at the massive pile of food and big leather bags filled with water. There is enough food and water to last a group of 10 people for months. Its my reward for locating survivors.

With a sigh, I activate the transmitter, (Darren? Let's meet again, I have some stuff for you.)

It looks like I need to find out what's happening with the Sanctuary first.

Chapter 284: The Sanctuary

Once again, we stand in front of the massive iron door leading to what I can only guess is a bunker, also known as the Sanctuary.

Darren keeps looking between me and the pile of food and water on the ground.

The entire time, I keep [Redistribution] on Vega so she can try to fight against it, as I disrupt her mana to up the difficulty for her.

Even though we are not leveling right now, she is raising the levels of her skills, and my intention is to help her learn how to recreate the effect of my Mantle. Making sure she can maintain control of her mana is a higher priority than raising her level.

Vega is getting hurt, and blood leaks from tears in her skin, as more blood flows from her nose, earning me a few weird looks.

Its not poisoned or anything, I tell Darren when he stays too silent.

I know that it most likely isnt, and we can check for and remove the poison if needed. I just cant understand where you got it from, and Im sure you wont tell me even if I ask.

He looks towards me and I nod, confirming his suspicion, then I increase the pressure on Vega as she starts to get the hang of fighting my skills. Did she level up her skills?

I like to be honest, Darren, and I don't like it when things become tedious or take too long. I know you likely have some trouble within the Sanctuary, and I want you to let me in.

You realize what you are asking for, right? There are a lot of weaker people we are protecting, our families, and our kids. We don't even know you.

And you realize that in the worst case, I can get inside on my own. Usually, I wouldn't mind taking some time to prove myself, but I don't have the luxury.

Nina, who once again stands by Darren's side, touches her sword, and our eyes meet.

Don't, Darren warns her and turns back to me. For a second, he glances at my disciple next to me and then back, Do I have your word, Nathaniel?

Kind of? If you guys attack me or my disciple, I will fight back.

That much is reasonable.

Father Nina leans closer and whispers something into Darren's ear, but he shakes his head.

He reaches into one of his pockets and pulls out a mana stone. He activates it, and sends a signal somewhere behind the giant circular iron door.

The massive door emits a few cracking noises before opening in a slow, smooth motion. There doesn't seem to be any mana involved at all, its motion powered by the combined strength of multiple men and women pushing it from inside.

They only open the door part way, and when Darren gestures to me, I release some of the pressure I'm putting on Vega and continue to disrupt her mana. We follow behind him, along with a dozen guards and Nina, some of them taking a moment to grab the supplies I left outside.

Welcome to the Sanctuary.

We enter into a rough circular tunnel filled with buildings made out of wood, mostly, which mostly seem to act as a space for the guards to rest. We get a few surprised looks as we pass by them, and the men on duty pull a series of ropes to close the door behind us.

The inside of the tunnel is made out of stone with gray veins of iron running through it. It reminds me of the gray stone from the 4th floor, the one used for the tunnels and orbital base. It's not like the material is the same, but the iron veins seem to be strengthening it, and when I send mana toward it, I sense channels gouged through that are empty and void of mana. The iron itself seems to serve as durable and mana-resistant shielding.

We delve deeper into the long, straight tunnel, taking us deeper underground. Some channels seem to have been cut into the stone to help with flooding.

I reach out and touch the walls, they are rougher than the floor, almost as if they were carved out in a hurry.

Did your group build the Sanctuary? I ask.

Darren shakes his head, The Sanctuary is older than anyone alive. From what we know, it was a bunker built long before the war, left abandoned and unused. Our ancestors came up with better types of bunkers, and the Sanctuary was considered to be obsolete. Some of the survivors found it after the war.

I listen carefully to what he says, and I can't help but feel a tingle of curiosity and excitement. I can't explain it properly, but this feels like fun. Even back on Earth, I liked the videos of people delving into old buildings and exploring them, or visiting bunkers from the World War era. There is something creepy, and exceedingly fascinating about them.

How old is the bunker, and when did the war start and end? Also, who fought in that war? And dont ask me why Im asking.

Darren closes his mouth in the middle of the question.

Nina answers instead, We estimate its around 120 years old. The war against the Veil started around 100 years ago and mostly ended around 99 years ago. For the rest of the 99 years, the Veil has been trying to wipe out what remains while fighting the monsters.

I dont even have to ask another question, as Nina continues, The Veil is the creation of the guild of enchanters. Something meant to protect our cities and help us with our war against the monsters. We dont know what happened, but the Veil turned against us and wiped out most of humanity within days of their activation.

We stop in front of yet another circular iron door. This one is smaller than the last, but still three times taller than me. Darren sends a signal, and we wait for them to open.

Thankfully, the monsters used the opportunity and attacked too, and that split the Veil along both fronts. Thats probably the only reason there were any survivors.

I ask, And the monsters, what are they?

They are just monsters... There isnt any one species of them, there are dozens. We believe there are a few really strong monsters either dominating or manipulating the others into attacking us. The monsters came here around 120 years ago and took over some territory in an event known as The Pairing.

Huh, that's interesting. So Pairings can happen even in worlds dominated by monsters? Or is it something else? Is it another race they just consider to be monsters? Or are the monsters just weapons of war, once used by another race, like the Colony and the Living Tree that the lynthari created?

The author's content has been appropriated; report any instances of this story on Amazon.

I partially expect my quest to learn about the fall of this planet to be completed, but nothing happens. Obviously, that would be too easy.

The door finally opens, and we continue walking deeper, the floor narrowing and descending into stairs. The echo of our steps starts to change, and we have more light as well. In the distance, I can hear voices and other sounds.

Soon enough, the cave opens up in front of us, and Vega loses her concentration, but I let it slide this time and stop disrupting her mana.

The cave, if I can call it that, is a perfect arch with smooth walls, with a mana crystal at the top of the dome. That crystal emits a gentle orange light that lights up the entire cave. A wide variety of buildings litter the cavern. The oldest towers and buildings appear to have been carved from a single block of stone..

In between those buildings, are houses made out of wood and bricks, as people weave through the alleys and streets as they go about their business. I estimate there are somewhere between a few hundred, and a few thousand people. Plenty of them are under level 20, and there are a lot of kids as well.

The Sanctuary seems to be a city of survivors, and even now, I cant find anyone stronger than me. That explains why Darren was so worried.

Master?

Yes?

You can continue, my disciple says.

I nod and renew my attempts to disrupt her mana.

Where do you get water and food from? I ask.

Darren seems relieved, seeing my reaction, or lack of it. Did he expect me to murder everyone or something? Well, I can't even be mad. Its fine to be so paranoid when you have so many people relying on you.

There are some old facilities we were able to reactivate and power. A few smaller gardens and a filtration system. We mostly get our water from the outside and use filtration to get rid of the poison.

That must take quite a while to get enough water for so many people.

He nods, Its nonstop work and dangerous too. There is a small aquifer that slowly fills, but we only use a small part of it. We also keep it replenished in case we would need to. Then we also hunt animals and have people that can get the poison out of their meat.

It still sounds suspicious, even if they did have enough strong people to bring the water, it would be a goddamn hard task. Do they have items like my Aqua Arcanum Vial? Something able to contain more water than its size should allow?

So, what is the problem you have down here?

Darren exchanges a quick look with Nina, and she steps ahead, I will be your guide and tell you as much as we can. Father has work to do.

Thats fine with me.

Im glad, I will see you later tonight. Darren then quickly leaves, followed by a few of his men.

The moment he leaves, Nina turns to me, I dont trust you.

Okay.

Taken aback after my answer she continues after a moment, I trust father, but he is getting less decisive as he grows older and has more people to take care of. I believe we could fight you.

My silly disciple once again stops focusing, and to punish her, I send a bit more mana towards her. Like a slap on the wrist.

You should have done that outside then, I respond.

Yes, maybe I should have, she doesnt seem to be overly antagonistic, just the hotheaded type that doesnt like to hold in their feelings.

A common variation of the extrovert class.

I would like to see your filtration systems. I have some water with me and would like to see how it works, to prove it, I pull out my epic Aqua Arcanum Vial.

So you also have a water storage item, Nina looks at it and then back to me. We can do that.

I follow behind her, and the guards follow us as well.

How much water can it store? Looking at its shape, its at least upper uncommon or maybe low rare? Ours are usually bigger, and the compression isnt that good, but since we can't fix damaged ones, we keep using them.

I avoid answering her question, You also said you were able to activate only some of the facilities?

Yes, there are many more, but oftentimes we dont even know what they were used for. We dont have enough mana to start some or enough skill to fix the others. And yes, before you ask, I can show you some. They dont work anyways, so its fine.

We pass through the streets of the city, and I start noticing that most people tend to wear homemade clothes, similar colors, and styles. They are fairly thin, but not overly so, and seem to be at least somewhat taken care of.

They greet Nina and her guards with a smile, and my guides return them. For a moment, their faces become less tense.

I glance back at Vega and notice that she is looking around with a suspicious expression. Her body is tense, and her mana is radiating, ready to fight. She twitches every time someone makes an unexpected movement and keeps searching for escape routes.

Her expression is colder than it was when we were on our own. She still tries to put on the mask to look innocent and defenseless, but it feels fake. A big difference from the relaxed behavior she exhibits around me.

I also notice that people don't seem to care about her red eyes or horns. Either her appearance is somewhat normal or it's the work of the system.

Pushing through the streets, Nina leads me towards the edge of the cave where we enter another tunnel, though it's much smaller this time. It's still wide enough for multiple people to walk side by side and better lit. Passing by a few men and women who seem to be working, we reach another cave, smaller than the main cavern, but still sizable, with the same domed construction.

This is one of our unused filtration plants. You just need to pour the water you have into the tank, close it, and then send your mana through the control device. As if challenging me, she continues, Do you think you can do that?

The smile that flashes across her face tells me that it's a bit harder than she lets on. Perhaps she expects me to falter once or twice, or perhaps she is trying to use reverse psychology on me.

The filtration tank is under the floor. It seems to be really long and narrow. Like a wide tube. At the bottom, I can sense some inscriptions and other things that seem to help with the filtration.

Out of that tube comes another that leads into the transparent tank in the wall that seems to store filtered water. This one is much bigger and empty. Next to that, is the control panel Nina pointed out. little more than a piece of iron with some inscriptions and a few mana stones, all connected to the tank under the ground.

I take out the vial and, while looking at Nina, start pouring the water inside.

At first, she is smiling as she watches the water trickle down.

Then I control the item and increase the pressure, causing much more water to flow through.

Her expression turns to confusion, and when I continue for a minute, it turns to shock.

When I finally stop, the tank, which is probably big enough to fill a swimming pool, is full. The remaining water in my vial is multiple times that.

Nina becomes even quieter when I put my hand on the control panel and activate it, avoiding any broken inscriptions.

A soft hum fills the room, and the water under the floor starts going through the filtration system, fed by my mana. That water moves through the tubes and flows into the giant glass tank that encompasses the entire wall and goes deep into the stone.

I make a few changes to the way I use my mana and find a few slightly hidden mechanisms in the control panel, turning off a few invisible switches. The drain on my mana dramatically increases, but the water starts filling the tank much faster. It pours from the tubes and inside of the tank like a series of waterfalls, quickly filling it within a few minutes.

Vega, noticing how much I'm enjoying this, pulls on my clothes, Asshole, she whispers so only I can hear.

What are you, Biscuits disciple?

Chapter 285: Old Facility

We haven't been using the tank you filled because it's too big and requires too much mana to operate. It's one of the older ones too, so it's not very efficient.

I listen to Darren and then answer, Yeah, I noticed. The inscriptions were quite bad.

He keeps staring at me.

What? Its getting creepy. Should I tell him Im not into men or something? Does he want money from me?

Nathaniel

Yes, that's my name.

The tank you filled should be able to supply us with water for half a year, and if we use it for showers, watering plants, and other stuff, it will still last for months. Do you even realize how much help youve been?

If you have a few more tanks like that, I can fill them too. Maybe four or five? As I say that, Darren just opens and closes his mouth like a goldfish. Yet out of all the people surrounding me, he seems to be the least surprised.

The annoying part is that this kind of help still hasnt completed the quest, but I guess that much is to be expected. The reward is 1,000 shards, filling one tank with water wont be enough.

I will fill five more and then I will take all filtered from the last one for myself, I offer. That amount of water should be able to last quite some time.

Something tells me that using an epic item as a glorified water flask would make some people beyond shocked.

I take the opportunity to ask for more, I also want to see the other facilities, the ones you guys were unable to activate.

W-why would you help us so much? Darrens voice sounds moved, and I notice that some other people are close to crying.

Huh?

I feel bad for being so suspicious of you. I apologize

What? Why is he talking like that and why are they looking at me? Its creeping me out. I just want to finish the quest and check out some cool facilities.

Such a good man. So people like that still exist, someone else whispers.

I can't understand. It's just a bit of water.

Well, whatever.

After filling the five more big tanks and taking one for myself, I'm being led through the city by Nina once again. A few people already seem to know what's happening, so a crowd has gathered, cheering and trying to swarm me.

Vega doesn't seem to like it either and moves closer to me, her body twitching at every loud noise and sudden movement. Nina seems to notice and guides us down roads with fewer people, and she even sends some orders into the transmitter.

After she puts the transmitter away, she looks at me, You probably still don't realize how much this means to us. There are days when we barely drink water because groups sent to collect it had to avoid the monsters. There is also constant worry that some of the water collectors will die, and they do sometimes. I don't think there's a single family that doesn't know a water collector who died or isn't worried about someone they know.

When she says it like that, it really gives me a new perspective.

Eventually, we come to a door embedded in the wall of the main cave. There are already a few men removing some sort of barricade.

Seeing what I'm looking at, Nina explains, This door leads to one of the older parts of the Sanctuary, and we have long since blocked them. Once every few years we go in there to see if theres anything we can do.

Damn, is she some sort of hype woman? Its looking more and more interesting by the second, and Im starting to forget where we are.

Master a small voice whispers next to me.

Oh. I come back to myself and start disrupting my disciple's mana again. Vega fights against it and, even though I'm limiting my output, she gets slightly hurt every time she tries to manipulate her mana too wildly. There are already dozens of small wounds all over her body, but she doesn't seem to mind at all. Every time she gets hurt, she only tries harder and rarely repeats the same mistake twice.

I thought she would hate me or treat me differently, I'm hurting her, am I not? I was prepared for that and even expected it. Part of me even wanted it to be that way, it would have made the end of the floor easier. Yet, the little half-demon weirdo doesn't seem to hold it against me, she even seems thankful.

Nina had long since noticed our activities, but this time she turns to me, Isn't that sort of training cruel?

Both me and Vega look at her, confused.

There are other ways to do it. I dont want to jump in between a master and their disciple, but this way seems to be painful.

Yes? I say carefully. I mean, sure, it is painful, but that much is fine, isn't it? When I look at Vega, she seems to agree and her expression matches my own.

Seeing that her men still arent done with removing the barricades, Nina turns back to me, You could teach her more theory first and gradually work up to it. She is really young, there is no need to cause her so much pain.

Vega answers in my stead, Master is much stronger than you, she says simply. As if that single sentence explains everything.

Something tells me that Vega isn't talking about levels or skills.

Nina, we are done! One of the men finally shouts, and Nina turns to him.

I notice as Vega shakes her head, seemingly disappointed that she must deal with such stupid people.

The story has been taken without consent; if you see it on Amazon, report the incident.

Isn't my first disciple just lovable?

Nina uses a key to unlock another circular iron door; though this one is only twice my height. Even after years of disuse, it opens smoothly, and they send some glowing orbs made out of a glass-like material ahead of us. Entering, I notice the vents on the ceiling that, unlike the other vents in the bunker, are not so well hidden.

Even though this part hasn't been used for a long time, the air here doesn't feel any different from the air in the main cave. The only big differences are the layers of dust and the slight drop in temperature. The lack of people also creates a different feeling.

We pass through a short tunnel and enter a big room. The room is big enough to fit an entire house inside, and that's it. There are no more tunnels, no doors or rooms. Just this perfect dome.

The floor is covered in inscriptions, and they span parts of the walls as well.

The room itself seems to be separated into multiple parts. One section is occupied by pillars made of mana crystals. Another section has a hole in the floor and the third section contains several tables and items made of iron and stone. Most of the things inside are connected with inscriptions.

Lastly, there is a mana stone in the ceiling, similar to the one in the main cave that mimics the sun.

It's quiet, there is dust. Technology, mana tech, inscriptions, whatever you might call it, are over a hundred years old. Left behind and hidden down in the darkness of this bunker they call the Sanctuary.

Nina says something, but I'm already ignoring her as I reach the part of the room with pillars made of mana crystals. They are light blue and partially transparent, six of them, each multiple times taller than me. They are lined up in a circle and in the middle of that circle is an iron panel with a brilliant mana stone embedded into it.

I grab a mana stone from my pocket and throw it to Vega, "Train on your own for a while."

Then I disrupt the annoying glass orbs the natives are using. The color of their light has an irritating quality and they flicker. The orbs fall to the ground. In their place, I create a dozen large thermal orbs that start releasing an even and cozy orange light. I add more thermal energy to them and then send them to float around the perimeter of the room.

I generate a tiny bit of kinetic energy and release it, blasting away dust in front of me.

Someone starts coughing and probably cursing, but I ignore them.

When I touch the panel, I activate my eyes and thermal energy to feed my healing passive. A few of my skills activate at the same moment and I start examining the inscriptions. There are so many more of them than I expected. All intertwined with each other and each has a different sort of function. Some lead to the floor, others towards the pillars, and still more to the ceiling.

"It's probably a control panel, but our theory is that it needs an immense amount of mana to jumpstart all at once, not gradually. One of our enchanters said that it needs to clear out the circuits. Another one said.

Nina continues to ramble, but I filter her out.

Well, her enchanters kind of suck. Even Elydor could figure it out, damn, I miss the man.

This facility isn't efficient at all and it's likely just as Nina said. It's one of the older ones they built quickly and left behind. Old technology. As if someone found a bunker from the World Wars.

The problem is that it needs a certain amount of mana to operate. That's because that mana is used to power all the functions of this facility at once, that's why you need that much of it. Even keeping it idle requires quite a bit and for people not even close to level 200, it's too much.

If you feed it mana gradually it will use it up before you can reactivate it and switch over to idle mode.

I start collecting mana inside my body and look around the room. I take a few deep breaths.

Am I childish to be excited by this kind of stuff? Probably a bit, but who cares? It's fun.

"Minion."

"I'm Vega."

"How is your progress?"

"There is a part that is really difficult, the one with a twist at the end."

Oh, I remember that one, "What's the problem with it?"

"It's hard to... twist mana that way? It's always slipping by."

That's weird, minion, that twist is similar to the pathway you are using to strengthen your feet.

What? Vega looks up at me, her red eyes full of surprise.

The stone I gave you should help to improve the strengthening of your body through the Mana Circuit trait you got. Especially the legs and feet. I also noticed that you stopped sensing your surroundings when you got the stone.

I

You?

It's my fault.

I check the amount of mana I hold now and it seems to be enough, but before using it I turn to Vega, It's fine if you are curious, but even though this feels safe, don't forget where we are. We don't know these people and no matter how nice they are right now, they may turn against us. We are just strangers they've known for a few days. This place feels safe but this world is dangerous and can change anytime.

I myself keep sending my senses as far as I can, no matter what I do and how much I concentrate on other tasks. This is Hell difficulty and even though there are times when it is safe, danger always lurks around the corner.

You tend to rely on me at times and that's okay in moderation. But disciple, I won't be here all the time. Always expect the worst and danger right behind the corner. Try to be somewhat polite even to people weaker than you, but always expect them to stab you in the back.

But master, isn't it hard? Being nice to people?

Of course it is hard. It is very hard, but what isn't? Not that long ago I was a lot meaner and cruel and it was easy, but at the same time, it felt off. I try to be different now, not because I'm being forced to or because of the way I was raised. I do it because I want to.

I grab her tiny horn and use it to shake her head gently, I might regret this decision later, I might even change my mind. But if I do regret it, I will be the only person to blame, because it was my decision. Oh, and there is also an exception to acting nice. If someone betrays you or hurts you or people you care about, show no mercy. Fuck them up and stomp what remains into the ground.

Master is amazing. Vega doesn't even try to make me let go of her horn and her eyes are full of admiration.

Such a weird half-demon.

I am, am I not? So, my first disciple Vega, do you want to make your master look bad?

No! She shakes her head and kicks my shin. She strengthens her body to do so, yet there is still barely any damage.

When I let go of her she returns her focus to the stone as she keeps watch over the area and the stone. The strain on her is obvious and I know the pain she is feeling right now.

Ready, I turn my attention and channel my mana through the mana stone and into the circuits that feed it, and from there to one of the mana crystals.

I release some of my hold on my mana and it rushes out like a raging river, but only where I want it to. None of that mana touches my disciple, none reaches beyond this room. All of it powers the facility. The light on the ceiling blinks on, along with several mounted on the walls of the room. A hint of a change occurs as the vents activate and start to filter the air.

Gradually even the circuits on the floor start glowing faintly and start releasing a bit of heat, most of it seems to come from the hole in one of the other parts of the facility. In the end, even the tables, covered by an old drop cloth, light up.

Nina's expression is fun to look at.

I want to talk with Darren, I have an offer for him. This place is a mix of a forge and an enchanting workshop, I would like to play with it.

I will try crafting some items and examine the other facilities. Three days. That's how long I will be staying here.

It's as much time as I'm willing to sacrifice. After that, I will take my disciple and head to Bastion and the Valley, and on our way there I will level her up.

But for now, let's try having some fun and creating items. I have some materials from the 4th floor.

Chapter 286: Crafting

"Ignore everything and observe my mana. Don't try to understand it fully. Pick one thread and watch it. Maybe this one," I point it out to my disciple, and she nods, her light brown hair flailing.

There is an uncommon dagger lying on one of the enchanting tables as I work on it. My disciple is sitting on the table too because she is too short to watch comfortably from the ground.

As for the table, well, it's a table made of stone with iron veins in the shape of circuits going through. Most of those circuits can be fed and activated to cause some effect.

For example, there is a set of circuits in the table meant to heat and melt things. I can channel lots of mana through them and melt the blade of the dagger or I can use less and melt smaller quantities of metal.

Another inscription allows me to decrease the temperature of an item sitting on the table, one seems to act like a magnet, and yet another seems to redirect mana, probably a handicap for people with less control.

I mean, it's not terrible, but it's mostly useless to me. I can imagine it being much more useful to someone at a lower level or with less control.

Another problem is that I don't know any theory and don't care about it. It's the same as when we went to the 2nd floor and saw all that mana used in breathtaking ways. The natives there were like people sending humans to Mars, while our group was like Neanderthals using sticks and stones. And to be honest, it didn't change that much. Sure, I collected some information, but I've avoided any proper study of it, and that's on purpose.

I find it more rewarding and interesting to learn through trial and error. Banging stones against each other to cause a spark rather than using a lighter. It feels more pure, more right.

Yes, it makes some things much more difficult, but I improve the most through struggle.

So, I ignore the tables circuits and use a bit of thermal energy to melt a small portion of the blade. I move and concentrate it into a thin thread that melts the bits I want with extreme accuracy. Then I take a mana stone and hold it against the dagger, melting the iron around it to hold everything in place.

Before it cools off, I add a piece of arcanadium, the conductive metal I looted from the 4th floor.

Not knowing what else to do, I use my fingers to mold the heated metal, as I improve the shape. A skin-tight barrier of mana protects my hand from any damage. I could absorb the heat, but that would be counterproductive.

When it seems okayish, I absorb the heat from the blade and the metal immediately stiffens; only then do I start the inscription.

Vega observes me as I told her, and I could swear she is not even blinking.

"Can you see mana with your eyes?" I ask her.

Interrupted, she blinks and looks at me, "No."

"Then close your eyes and use your other senses."

She opens her mouth to say something but closes it immediately. After nodding once, she closes her eyes, and I continue. The inscriptions I'm making are extremely simple. A few simpler ones inside the uncommon mana stone to direct the mana being channeled through it. And a few more for the blade itself.

I melt parts of the blade adding tiny bits of arcanadium. This time I even create tiny toothpick-like things with [Regalia] to move the molten metal. The twins would be proud; they always had fun when I was doing things in an extremely janky way.

I don't measure the time, but I'm sure at least a few hours have passed like that. But in the end, it's done, and the ugliest dagger ever made sits in front of me.

As the last step, I permanently etch the inscriptions inside of the stone and the blade with the use of [Resonance] and [Infusion].

Huhu, let's see my masterpiece.

Ember Edge Dagger (uncommon) -This dagger has a mana stone embedded in the blade, which absorbs mana to gently warm the metal. The heat is mild, ideal for causing discomfort rather than serious burns, making it a subtle, yet effective tool.

Is the system dissing me? This description sounds weirdly insulting.

"Do you want it?" I ask Vega, and she quickly nods and takes the dagger I offer her. She seems weirdly enthusiastic about it, but I let it pass.

Well, I guess that's the difference between working alone and having the help of an entire craft guild with hundreds of years' worth of knowledge.

Inscriptions aren't a problem, and I know I can make much stronger ones, and this was just my first attempt. Smelting and this kind of stuff will be annoying.

There is also the option of using mana-conductive metal for the entire dagger and avoiding using mana stones at all. In that case, I wouldn't have to work on connecting it to the blade. Of course, it would also increase the cost of the materials.

I watch as Vega happily accepts the dagger, puts it back into its original sheath, and carefully clips it into her belt. The dagger made of my mana that I keep restoring is still there too and is much better than the one I just gave her. Yet, she is happy.

Silly girl.

"Minion, we will continue."

She joins me, without even complaining about being called a minion.

I take out another dagger and mana stone and get into the work.

Razor's Whisper Dagger (uncommon) - Embedded with a small mana stone near the hilt, this dagger gains a sharp edge when mana is channeled into it. The effect subtly enhances the blade's cutting ability, allowing for cleaner, more precise cuts.

If you stumble upon this tale on Amazon, it's taken without the author's consent. Report it.

It won't be getting any points for looks, but so far it looks fine. I will sell it to the system shop later. It will be only 20 shards, but it's better than nothing.

"Let's stop here for now," I tell Vega.

"Yes!" She quickly jumps from the table and then, facing me, she asks, "Will you eat with me, master?"

"Gladly."

Even after so many times, she is always happy to hear my answer.

I watch as she rushes to get two clean pieces of cloth and some of the food I rewarded her with for leveling her skills.

The two of us alone in the facility slowly and wordlessly eat the food she puts in front of us and drink some water from the bottles. While doing so, I observe this silly disciple of mine.

After a few days with regular food, she is not as thin as before. She is also wearing new clothes I bought for her and has a few bags that I gave her, where she stores her things. She is extremely protective of them to the point of being cute.

Just like before, she has a few bruises and healing wounds, but these are mostly the products of sparring and practice. The biggest wound seems to be a massive black-and-blue bruise that covers most of her chest and back. Vega got it while we were practicing with her Kinetic Demon Heart.

I could have stopped it and made it so she wouldn't get hurt, yet I didn't. I have noticed that she tends to become careless when things go well. It's one of my flaws as well. Both of us become comfortable and fascinated by something, and then because of our overconfidence in our progress, we become careless. I wonder if it's caused by our skills at all. Both of us rely on concentration skills that help us focus. So, my theory is that we may become less focused when the skills aren't active.

As if we weren't used to it, seeding our weakness to distractions and carelessness.

It's fascinating to think of.

"Minion, I've wanted to ask for a while, but what happened to you before you got summoned here to be my disciple?" I ask after she is done packing her things.

She doesn't complain about being called a minion this time either, though she hesitates.

She can refuse to answer as always, so I just give her time.

"I was hungry, very hungry," she finally tells me. "In my village, there wasn't anyone willing to share any food with me, and a few humans even kicked me when I asked. So, I went to the forest. I heard from other kids from the streets that you could find mushrooms there that would be safe to eat."

She pauses again, but then shakes her head, "There were monsters in the forest, and I was running away. Then I appeared near the lake, and the voice told me about the master."

It seems like the others were correct. The disciples were about to die and were sent to us. The question is are they from the real world or were they generated by the tutorial, like the natives. Fated to disappear once the quest is complete.

Yes, the system said they are from some sort of database, but why would it only summon disciples that were about to die? There is a method I thought of that could get me the answer, but I still hesitate to use it.

"Do you know what your world is called?" I ask instead.

"No. Even the village we just call 'the village.'"

"Country or kingdom where you are?"

"Breck kingdom, after the ancient human hero who created it."

"Pairing?"

"I don't know what that is."

Well, it looks like I won't be getting answers to my questions. I can't expect much knowledge from someone who spends most of her time keeping herself alive.

"Well, it doesn't matter anyway," I gesture for her to turn around, and she does it quickly, as multiple times before.

She doesn't even shudder when I put my palm on her back, a place near where her heart is.

"This time, concentrate more on feeling the rhythm of your heart. Do not think of it as a source. The heart is meant to transform your mana into kinetic energy. It's not creating it; it's just a tool, think of it as one."

"Yes, master."

After delivering me a few ingots of metal they found in the bunker as they moved in, Nina leaves. These ingots were probably made a few hundred years ago and left to be forgotten. Of course, their quality isn't anything great, and their conductivity is terrible, but they will be good enough to practice some smelting.

I already went through some information stored on one of the mana stones I got from the craft guild for some basic information. We will see how helpful they are.

"Master?"

"Yes, disciple?" For the first time, I avoid calling her 'minion'. Lately, she's stopped reacting to it, and it's not as much. Wait, what's that?

Did a smug, winning smile flash across her face? Why would she have such an expression? The only thing that changed is that I didn't call her 'minion'.

As if to mask something, she starts rapidly blabbering about her practice, but I'm staring at her, and the gears in my head are spinning.

She always complained about being called 'minion', but then one day she stopped. Instead, her red eyes kept observing me, like a cat toying with a mouse.

Oh, I get it.

I understand now.

This cheeky little thing.

"Good job, minion, you may continue practicing like that," I say, and I pay her my full attention. Once again, she doesn't complain, but for a moment, her brow furrows, confirming my thoughts.

This little cheeky minion read me. She acted as if she wasn't bothered. She expected me to get bored with her lack of reaction, drop that and maybe find something else. Even now, she is sticking to the plan.

"Minion, and don't forget to train with the mana dagger I made for you, minion."

"Yes, master."

"Oh, and minion, I saw you talking with Nina a bit. It's okay, but don't get too attached." Every time I call her 'minion', there is just a tiny hint of a reaction, and that makes me happy, but I won't let it show.

"Master, you don't trust these people?"

"Not much. I will ask you something. How many people do you think they have here?"

"I do not know."

"You don't, but I do. They have over 3,140 people. It's hard to say accurately because people come and go, but that is the lowest estimate."

Vega's expression becomes even more confused, so I continue, "Try to guess how many people go in and out with food?"

"A lot? There are a lot of people to feed."

"You would think so, right? Well, my dear minion. They have only a few tens of people going out and bringing back food. There are more of them pretending to, and it's not just for my benefit. Most of the people here believe they are bringing food."

"I don't understand, master."

"It's simple. Most of the food they eat comes from a hidden tunnel inside one of the houses that Darren, Nina, and a few others are staying in."

Confused Vega also looks cute, so I grab her horn, shake her head, and let her think for herself.

For now, let's not eat the food they offer us, and when I'm done with practicing, I will have to check the tunnels Darren is hiding.

Chapter 287: I speak on behalf of my master

POV - Water Collector Oren - a different instance of the 5th floor

"Did you check your gloves, newbie?"

"For fuck's sake, Oren, of course I did. You've told me only fifty times in the past few days."

I ignore the harsh words from the young man and watch as he dips his gloved hands into the lake, its poisoned as are most of the water sources, and the elbow length gloves are meant to help with that.

"Do you have enough mana to fill the entire vial?"

"Just so-so," he answers, and I nod.

I quickly check the transmitter, but it's quiet. Our scouts would warn us if any dangerous animals or monsters were heading our way. As always, I can't help but feel afraid when I'm outside the Sanctuary. But there is no helping it, we need the water, what I'm doing is extremely important and

(Human, can you hear me?) speaks a soft voice inside my head.

I quickly send a warning to the scouts with our transmitter.

"We have company," I shout to Sevil, and he quickly jumps to his feet.

The voice speaks again, (I mean you no harm.) That voice is soft, not threatening, and it sounds young. Like a young boy around ten years of age.

With a spear in my hand, I start backing away from the lake and the forest, and Sevil moves behind my back.

"Show yourself!" I shout and squeeze my weapon.

(As you wish,) the young voice replies, and the trees in the forest start moving.

I freeze on the spot, unable to move, and watch as a massive black body pushes the branches and smaller trees apart as it enters the clearing. It is a wolf. A wolf twice my height. His fur is pitch black without any hint of color in it. It has a beautiful shine to it.

Each of the wolfs steps is elegant and every movement it makes sends an impulse through my body telling me to run. The monster itself is trying to not look threatening as it stops nearby, and his calm golden eyes stare at me without moving closer.

(Do not be afraid, human,) once again, the young voice in my head implores. Only then do I realize that it really is the wolf talking. A wolf with such a young voice. Could it still be a pup? There is no way; he is already so big!

"W-what do you want?" I manage to choke out.

(I speak on behalf of my master.)

"Master?!" A creature like that has a master? How terrifying a being would it have to be!?

Slowly, the black wolf lowers its head, and only then do I notice another animal sitting between its ears. That animal is much smaller, barely reaching my knees. It's sandy yellow with white markings. It has four short legs. Its tail is almost nonexistent. But even to me, the creature looks cute.

The terrifying wolf's master just blinks a few times, its face almost looking as if smiling. The golden eyes of the wolf move upwards, and it seems like it's communicating with its master.

(Human, my master requires food.)

"D-do you want to eat us?" I gulp.

I know it's useless, but I still try to bluff with the weapon in my hand. In the worst case, I will buy some time for Sevil to run away.

(Master doesn't eat humans, human,) once again, the youthful voice of the black wolf speaks.

It takes a step closer and lowers its head a bit more, (Of course, in exchange for your food, the master is willing to pay. I hope you realize how graceful the master is!)

As he finishes, the small creature with short legs starts floating in the air and heading towards us. Its tongue is sticking out slightly, and it moves extremely slowly, yet the black wolf looks at his master with eyes full of admiration.

Only now do I realize that its master is wearing some clothes with plenty of small pockets. The quality of the cloth seems to be better than anything I've ever seen in my life. And from the black wolf, a few full bags are hanging.

The master stops just a short distance away from us, and then purple mana radiates from its back, taking on a different shape. That tendril of purple mana reaches into the pockets, and the creature puts things on the ground in front of us.

There are pieces of glass, pretty river stones, and some crystals without any worth.

(Asshole,) a different voice sounds in my head. It's calm and sounds maybe even younger than the black wolf. It's the kind of voice that makes you drop your guard.

But why did it call me an asshole? Have I insulted it somehow?

I gulp, but my throat feels dry, "I will contact Darren; this is way beyond me."

(Leader of your pack? Do it, human!) The black wolf moves closer too and lowers its head, sniffing at the pieces of glass and stones on the ground. Its eyes meet with the eyes of his master, and they seem to be communicating again.

(I have received wisdom from my master! I shall not call you human anymore!)

That's weird.

(I shall call you an asshole starting now!)

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What?

"Poor little girl, why hasn't she run away from you?" the old granny at the top of a skyscraper asks.

She is done healing Vega. There was an accident with Vega's Kinetic Demon heart. She practiced on her own and pummeled her body to the point where I had to rush here to heal her. So now, the little half-demon is avoiding my gaze as much as possible. She seems to be ashamed and worried I might be angry.

To be honest, I couldn't feel more different. Sure, she risked a lot, but it reminds me of myself constantly losing my limbs because I had Lily to restore them.

Good old times. Damn, I bet I lost enough limbs to build another Nathaniel.

The effect field that was trying to put us to sleep is gone, so I make the decision to stay a bit longer. I observe the insides of the house and through the window, I see the garden on the rooftop and a view over the city. Granny really picked a nice spot.

"Do you know anything about the Sanctuary, the war, and other things?"

"A thing or two, but nothing you wouldn't be able to get from Darren," she snorts and offers some food to my disciple.

Vega eats it only after I nod. She seems to like it, so she politely thanks and even plasters a fake smile on her face.

I have noticed it before, but even after almost two days in the Sanctuary and a few visits to the granny, she hasn't opened up to any of them. That's what they get for picking an extrovert class.

"Where do they get all the food?" I ask.

The granny freezes, her expression changing multiple times in the span of one second until it becomes an emotionless mask.

"I don't know what you are talking about," she says simply.

"That's it?"

"Yes."

Vega sits next to me and looks up, her red eyes curious. I gesture to her letting her know that I will tell her later.

When I stand up to leave, the granny doesn't say anything, nor does she try to stop me, and my disciple and I leave. I jump over the edge of the building with Vega holding onto me.

"Are you angry?" she whispers, her face pressed against my chest.

The cheeky little thing is probably listening to my heartbeat. I've long since noticed the weird fascination demons seem to have with hearts.

"Not really, just be more careful next time," I don't have to urge her more. You learn the best lessons when you can feel them on your skin.

Vega messed up and got terribly hurt too. It's not something she would forget and it's more effective than me constantly reminding her.

She listens to my heart a bit more and then looks up, a smile on her face. The little half-demon seems to have confirmed the truths of my words by listening to my heart.

"Are hearts that fascinating to your people?" I ask her.

"Yes," she nods. "It's a feeling. I can't explain it very well. Demons with strong hearts are admired. They are rich, powerful, and respected."

"Do you want that?"

"Should I not?"

"I mean, it's up to you, but let me tell you a few things. Being rich might be fun, but I think you would find it just as boring as I do. Yes, pretty clothes and a house with a nice view are good to have, but in the end, they are just things."

I push us higher and slow to a walk across the top of one of the skyscrapers. Over the horizon, the sun is already setting, the last light disappearing and the city turning dark. Clouds form in the sky and it's about time for mana rain.

"As for being respected. I don't think it matters. What matters is how you see yourself, disciple. That opinion is the most important. I know you are still young, but you will learn with time, even though you might not believe me right now."

"Then what does master want?"

"It's simple, power." It starts raining, but my barrier protects us.

In the dark city around us, only the tiny blue lights of the raindrops shine, and when they crash against the barrier, there is a small explosion of color. It's pretty.

"I want power, personal power. The one I can consider mine that no one can take away from me. A power above everyone else."

My eyes meet those deep red eyes, and she asks, "Why?"

"Because if you are powerful, you can do whatever you want. You can travel and explore places like the bunker we are currently staying in. You can go where you wouldn't be able to otherwise. You can protect yourself and the people you care for."

"So I need to become powerful?"

"Minion, I told you shouldn't care what others think, not even me. Find what you want to do and what makes you happy, and then put your entire being into reaching that goal. Bleed, hurt, sweat, push until you feel like breaking apart if needed. Because only then will you be content, even if you fail."

"Is that what master is doing?"

"Why are you asking?"

"I know nothing about the master."

"I told you before, most of the things I'm teaching you are my own theories"

She interrupts me, "I didn't mean that. What is the master's favorite color? What food do you like the most? What is your favorite skill, things like that."

That's so silly I can't help but be amused. Ever since the start of the tutorial, things like that haven't mattered at all. Well, other than my favorite skill.

We exit the city, and while heading towards the Sanctuary, I answer, "My favorite color I would say gray or black, but I'm not too picky. As for food maybe pizza? My skill"

Vega interrupts me again, "What is pizza?"

I look down at her, and with her ear pressed against my chest listening to my heart, she looks up, Her red eyes curious.

"It's like bread, in the shape of a flat disc. You bake it in an oven, and you put different toppings on it. Cheese, salami, meats, you add tomato sauce, that kind of thing. Minion, would you believe that there are maniacs who like them with sweet fruits on top? If you ever meet such a person, avoid them."

Even without fully understanding, Vega giggles, "I would like to try pizza sometime."

"That would be nice. And what's your favorite food?"

"Mine?" she pauses as if surprised by the question and then thinks for a bit. A small smug smile takes over her face, "When I was younger, a few kids from the street called me to join them. They wanted to steal some things from a merchant. I knew they wanted to steal and run leaving me behind to take the blame, but I still joined them."

I use [Redistribution] to absorb kinetic energy from the rain in a massive area around us. That makes Vega pause, and with big eyes, she observes as the falling rain slows down to a crawl.

A weird silence filling the area around us, "Pretty," she whispers and continues, "I still joined them because I was hungry, but I tricked them. When they started stealing, I stayed behind and let them distract people. One of the merchants nearby went to see what was happening. He left just for a second, but I stole a small sack with some sweet candy."

She stops, eyes bright and remembering the moment. She pushes against my chest, and I can feel the warmth of her small body.

Vega smiles at me, "I ran and ran like never before. I ran until I couldn't breathe, and even then I was smiling. Then, in one of my hiding places, I ate all the candies. All of them, alone!"

Even while entering the Sanctuary, I ignore the guards and listen to my silly disciple.

Chapter 288: Preparations and secrets

"I can come back later," Nina says somewhat awkwardly.

"It's okay," I answer and shift a bit.

Currently, I'm sitting on the floor, and two women are drawing on my skin. My upper body is bare and my pants are pulled up high, revealing my thighs. The women hold brushes in their hands, using some of the mana-conductive paint I have left.

On the ground in front of them is a design of my creation, and they are transferring it to my skin.

It's the middle of day two of my planned 3-day stay in the Sanctuary, and with Darren's help, I went looking for someone to draw circuits of my design. Suspiciously, he picked two pretty young women. Even more suspiciously, they've been a bit too friendly as well.

I guess that's probably Darren's attempt at tying me to the Sanctuary?

Well, it doesn't matter. At least they can draw well; otherwise, I would have sent them away.

Nina nods and after glancing at me for a moment, she says, "We started unblocking one of the older facilities. It's a secondary control room, but we've never had any use for it, and it's damaged. In an hour or two, it should be ready as you asked."

"That sounds nice," I mean, the current enchanting and smelting facility is nice, and I tested plenty of things, but who wouldn't want to see more?

"Also, your disciple tried to stab and bite one of our men when they tried to help her carry her bag," Nina adds.

I turn to the side where Vega is practicing. The little half-demon doesn't even pretend to not hear and returns my gaze.

"Good job, but next time try the kick first. Stabbing is for when someone means you harm," I tell her. To that, Vega quickly nods and returns to her training.

Nina watches our exchange with a mildly shocked expression, but then quickly shakes her head.

She takes a step closer, "And if you have time tomorrow, my father wants to talk with you about something serious."

"We will see tomorrow." I lift one of my arms so the woman can paint it.

Not having a reason to stay, Nina leaves, and I observe the circuits they've drawn on me. It's annoying that I couldn't do it myself, but it's hard to draw on my back or chest while keeping the lines straight.

Sure, the occasional mistake isn't a problem, and the first attempts I made on my arm weren't that bad. But I want to find out how much things change with well-drawn circuits. Is there a difference between a wobbly line and one that's well drawn? Does making an oval instead of a circle affect it at all? How much deviation do I need to worry about?

That's the question I'm asking.

The women Darren recommended are doing a good job. Their hands are steady, and they are not wasting any paint. They even stopped ogling to focus on their work. I mean, I don't blame them, hehe. As my mom said around twelve years, three months, and around five days ago, I'm a handsome young man.

"Minion, I'm handsome, right?"

"It's Vega, master, I'm your disciple, not a minion." Shes clearly given up on her attempts at reverse psychology.

"Sure."

"Master's eyes are pretty."

"Only my eyes?"

"Heart too!"

Well, even that much is fine, "I also like your eyes and heart, minion," even though it is an undeserved 4th trait spot the demons must have cheated to get.

One of the women giggles, and when I catch her gaze, she smiles with a slight blush on her face. She quickly averts her gaze and continues.

I send my mana through some of the completed circuits. When mana flows through them, the paint hardens even more, and I immediately notice the difference between my wobbly lines and the nicer ones.

Damn it. I just want to do things in my own janky way.

Sending a bit more mana through them, I activate my Mana Wavelength Iris and observe the movement of the mana. So far, it looks like everything is working as it should.

Sure, I could do a construct instead of this, but right now I hesitate. The drawings should help me deal with black mana, and I'm not ready to create a construct for that until I'm sure it's correct. Anyway, I'm already preparing another construct and I'm still working on its structure, and I've recorded it in one of my mana stones. I have no time to create another one.

Unlike lines drawn on my skin, the constructs are much more difficult and require more of me. They need to be carefully placed and connected at the right places, and they affect me more deeply.

Plus, there's limited space inside of my body, and unlike my skin, I can't just wash a construct away.

Soon enough, the work is done, and I send both women away before they make any advances.

Sending mana through my skin, I dry the mana infused paint and observe the results. So far, it seems all good, and if it works as intended. I should be able to strengthen my body with black mana without too much in the way of aftereffects. And if that works, I should be able to use black mana to power other skills without my brain melting. That would be nice.

Unfortunately, it seems to be a one-time use as the drawings crumble the moment black mana flows through them, but even that is okay. In the worst scenario, I can use black mana without them, though the aftereffects will be worse.

Standing up, I put my shirt back on and fix it.

"Minion, we are going to see the facility," I have decided to keep Vega close to me as much as possible.

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"Yes, master!"

As we head towards the place I expect to find Darren, I observe Vega. She is still constantly using her mana to observe, and even though she is so low-level, she does it well. Even when I met her for the first

time, she did pretty well with it, and it only improved with my amazing mentorship. She even keeps circulating mana through her body, an early attempt at Mana Cycling, as Lissandra taught me.

The fun thing about it is that the more I use Mana Cycling, the more I appreciate it, and it runs the entire time I'm awake. I even suspect that my body is reflexively maintaining it while I sleep.

Mana Cycling takes my mana and sends it through my body in the channels I've defined. With a better understanding, you can even stop mana from leaking. I'm not at the level where I can completely pull it off, but it's good enough to trick most people, even some who are higher level than me. Other than hiding mana, it also improves my control.

We reach the circular door entirely made out of the same metal as the others. There is already a group of men nearby who've already moved the barricades.

I give time to Nina to greet them and give orders before we follow through the tunnel which serves as a hallway. Unlike the one from before, this one is much smoother, and there are even some decorative lines etched into the walls to our sides. As we pass by them, I touch the wall and after a quick examination, I channel my mana through it, causing them to slowly illuminate our path as I maintain contact.

The light is gentle and easy on the eyes, yet it's bright enough to evenly light the hallway. There are a few side rooms, and I peek inside, but most are completely empty and lack much in the way of interesting circuits. At the end of the hallway, there is another circular entrance, and we enter a small chamber.

In the middle of that room stands a single pillar made of mana crystal. This one seems different from the ones in other facilities, and I can't quite put my finger on how, maybe it's higher quality? It's a darker shade of blue as well.

The mana crystal seems to be damaged, or at least the control panel connected to it is.

"Are you not worried about letting me into the control room? I could take over and cause all kinds of trouble." I ask.

Nina flashes me a smile, "You are just that kind of person that rubs me the wrong way. But I can't deny that if you had wanted to, you could have caused much more trouble already. Without having to bother with petty tricks."

"Maybe I'm just playing with you and plotting behind your back."

"Maybe you are, but I trust my father, and he seems to think its ok. And it's too late to try to stop you at this point."

I can't help but be a bit disappointed. These people gave up that easily and put their lives into the hands of some random guy just because hes stronger than them. Yes, there is logic to it, but it's still somewhat disappointing.

Thankfully, at least Vega seems to agree with me, judging by the look she gives Nina.

Ive already been collecting my mana for a while, and I put my hand on the control panel to send a bit through. I quickly identify where the inscriptions are messed up and search for the secondary pathways, and surprisingly, they are damaged as well.

In the end, I decided to ignore the messed-up parts. Fixing them would take too long and I would have to replace the entire segment. Instead, I just put an anchor on the mana crystal and send my mana directly to it. There will be leaks, but I decide I will overcome them with the sheer amount of mana I will be pushing through.

I step away and continue to send my mana through [Tether], and gradually the room lights up. There is no crystal in the ceiling, instead, beautiful ornaments light up all around the room, and even the mana crystal starts letting out some light.

Taking a few steps, I reach another control panel, the one meant to manage this facility. The mana stone that is the center of it seems okay, and I put my hand on it and send a bit of mana through.

Inside the stone, there are multiple sets of inscriptions, each connecting to a different part of the Sanctuary. Some seem to be devoted to protecting the bunker. Others are for heating, water, and air

filtration, and that's just the start. Several don't seem to be working, not because of any issue with the mana stone, it's likely because those parts of the bunker are ruined.

Looking though, I still can't find anything in the hidden tunnels where Darren and others were getting the meat. Interesting, maybe they've blocked it on the other side?

Otherwise, there isn't much interesting to do. Sure, it's all fun and cool. I could turn on the heating, send more mana through, and open the door or lock all of them. I could even use water from the tanks to fight against a possible fire. It's something I would otherwise like to play with, but not with the short amount of time I've got on this floor.

"Nothing interesting, most of the things are impossible to control from here, and there is plenty of damage in the connections," I tell Nina and stop feeding my mana to the mana crystal.

It gradually dims out, and we leave with her. The door stays open so I can return later.

"So, do you understand what to do?" I ask Vega.

"Yes! I will sit here inside of the barrier, and if something happens, I will send a signal through your anchor, and you will return."

"Good. See you later then, okay?"

"I will continue to train."

I give Vega one more look. She is currently inside my room. It's a nice room in one of the original towers in the middle of the main cave. The room is nicely decorated, and most of the furniture is made of stone with some soft cushions to cover it.

There is a barrier made with [Regalia] surrounding Vega. It's powered by one of the higher-grade mana stones I left with her. I've used enough power to last for hours without using mana from the stone.

Then it can defend against multiple attacks on its own, and if that's not enough, it will use mana from the mana stone. I don't think there is anyone in the city capable of breaking it quickly, yet I still leave an anchor nearby so I can return quickly. The door into the room is also blocked by my mana, along with the other entrances.

Giving a last look to the room and my disciple, I use [Tether] and teleport to the anchor I left by the hidden tunnels. Then I start hiding my mana and use [Perception] to avoid people.

[Mana Domain] expands, and I create a few more anchors, teleporting multiple times to avoid people. There are a few guards inside of the house over the secret tunnels, but they don't feel me placing anchors or teleporting.

Appearing behind the door they're guarding, I start walking. The tunnel is dark, and the air here feels different. There also aren't many inscriptions or veins of metal like in the other ones. This tunnel feels much newer. Did they construct it after moving here? That could explain why they weren't on the maps inside the mana crystal.

I feel another presence heading towards me, and I reach past them and place the anchor. Only when I'm about to be spotted, do I teleport past. As with before, the guard doesn't feel my domain, nor do they notice when I place anchors or teleport. I send more of my mana ahead and find a small room at the end of the tunnel. That room currently has a single person inside of it.

The air takes on a smell like rust. It smells like blood, lots of blood.

I detect the guard leaving and continue to walk towards that room. The closer I get, the more I smell it, and the heavier the air feels. There's even dried blood on the floor and the walls.

Gradually the light permeates the dark tunnels, and I enter the room. The room has been painted bright white, yet that only serves to emphasize the blood covering everything, the floor, the walls, and even the ceiling, all thrown into stark relief by the bright lights.

There are a few boxes stuffed in the corner of the room, each of them filled to the brim with severed legs and arms. In another corner, a man sits on a bed. His legs up, knees in front of his chest. He has long hair covering his face and is wearing bloodied clothes with short sleeves.

His eyes are cold and he watches me calmly. I notice a silver metal collar around his neck and a chain of similar metal tying him to one of the walls.

[Lifebloom Weaver - lvl 206]

Chapter 289: Against the Veil Guardian

For a moment, we look at each other. Two men in a small white room covered in blood, with boxes full of bloody limbs in the corner. Keeping an eye on him, I find a relatively clean spot and sit on the floor, resting my back against the wall.

And then I just sit there.

The man's eyes are calm, and yet they have a weird shine to them. They are not the eyes of an animal backed into a corner, tired and threatening. They are more like the eyes of someone whos given up.

You are not one of them, his voice is quiet and rough as if he is not used to talking.

Im just passing by, I reply.

Just passing by, he repeats.

Yes. By the way, do you know anything about the Veil, the Mirror, the Valley, Pairing, war, monsters, or Veil Guardian?

He seems to be taken aback and chuckles. Even that chuckle sounds weak and forced. It sounds like hes laughing at himself.

You are not going to ask about... he gestures at the room.

Is there any need to? Locals seem to have an interesting diet. That's it. They likely forced you into this. At least I don't think anyone would go along with this willingly, and the collar around your neck confirms it.

Another chuckle, You're wrong.

Am I?

He brushes the hair from his face, his deep eyes staring into mine, Fuck knows how long ago I agreed to this, the man says to my surprise.

In the beginning, it was simple, really. They needed food and I wanted to help. Probably out of regret or maybe I felt like I owed these people something.

You seem to have changed your mind halfway through, I gesture at his neck where the collar is.

His smile shows his teeth, it feels almost threatening, Do you know how it feels to have your legs and arms sawn off day after day for decades? To know what they are doing with them? It doesn't matter how much you want to help, after enough time you can't take anymore. So get off your fucking high horse, you brat.

I ignore the last sentence, So, you want to get out?

For the first time, he hesitates, almost like pure panic appearing on his face, A lot of them would die without the man still says, his eyes changing, a hint of craziness surfacing.

He pulls his knees higher and hides his face, Kids, men, and women. Innocent people, my skill isn't good enough at regenerating others to do it with someone else or an animal, he wobbles from side to side, his voice even weaker than before.

I give him time and gradually he calms down enough to look at me, changing the subject, The Veil was our biggest hope, even I contributed, everyone did. But none of us knew much. The Enchanter Guild were the main organizers and they were very secretive about their greatest creation. The most brilliant minds on our planet. People treated them like gods.

Some sanity returns to his eyes, Oh, how beautiful their promises were. Every single city, protected by a Veil encompassing the entire planet. A construct so perfect it would run on its own following a set of rules overseen by a coalition of all the worlds kingdoms.

Out of nowhere, he starts laughing, Pairing, weve experienced it twice now. Either we were unlucky or we did something wrong. Who the fuck would know for sure, what with the system being so cryptic all the time. Once again, he laughs like he just told a great joke.

His eyes meet mine again, and this time they are calm, sane, and clear. Now fuck off. I'm tired of your face. Leave me alone. You can take some and snack on it later, he points at the box full of limbs, a cruel expression on his face.

I give him one more look, then activate one of my anchors and reappear inside the city, on top of one of the skyscrapers. To be sure, I check the anchor I left near Vega and send my senses through. I get a little bit of feedback, but everything seems fine.

Three orbs form next to me, and I start feeding them: one with kinetic energy, another with thermal, and the last one with mana. Dark blue, golden, and pale blue to the point of transparency, the orbs follow me as I jump off the building and boost myself towards the granny. For a short moment, I enjoy the feeling of wind on my face as I'm flying through the air until I reach the cottage at the top of the skyscraper. I pass through the field which sends her a signal before entering the house.

What, did you come to break more of my pots you brat? Don't tell me the kid that was following you died. Where is she? The Vitalist inquires.

She is fine. Safe and currently training. I have a question for you if you don't mind.

No gifts, you still owe me, and you come here asking for more. So typical of the current generation, she grumbles, but I notice a hint of curiosity in her eyes. I think she must be bored, being here alone most of the time.

How old are you? I ask.

That makes her cackle, and she doesn't answer.

Are you from before the war?

Why would I tell you?

What is Veil?

Don't be annoying, she snorts.

Do you know a man with the class Lifebloom Weaver?

Stop asking she freezes in the middle of the sentence. Her expression changes and turns dark. I [Focus] and try to read her mood as much as possible. I observe the movements of her body, her face. I even listen to the sound of her heart as it beats, each one creating the tiniest bit of kinetic energy I can feel as well as her movements.

Friend?

She doesn't say anything.

Unauthorized duplication: this tale has been taken without consent. Report sightings.

Husband?

Nothing.

Family?

Her heartbeat speeds up, a slight twitch across her face.

Son? Father?

Listen here. Do not even dare speak of this in front of me, or I will never heal that brat of yours again.
How dare you

He is tied up there, did Darren tell you? my words silence her, I spoke with him and he said at first he did it because he wanted to. But now they use some collar to keep him there.

She falls silent, and the pause stretches so long that I'm tempted to leave when she finally whispers,
"One hundred twenty-seven."

Yes?

That's how many kids younger than ten there are in the Sanctuary. One hundred twenty-seven.

Do they all know?

She just shakes her head.

What a fucked-up situation.

"Leave." That word is barely a whisper, more a plea than a threat.

And I do just that. I activate one of my anchors and appear near the city's center. I sit on a rooftop with my legs hanging over the edge and continue to fill the orbs next to me while spinning them around.

The thing, the weird invisible lines of mana covering the sky and probably the entire planet, is probably the Veil, or at least a part of it. I tried to touch it shortly after starting the 5th floor. That's also when the Veil Guardian appeared, likely summoned by the attempt. The monster's name makes a lot more sense now.

So what is the Veil? A construct covering the entire planet? I heard a lot of praise for the Enchanter Guild from Darren and Nina, though I've mostly dismissed it as a legend. But maybe I was wrong. My current skill makes it hard to even imagine how something like that would work.

What powers it? What keeps it there? What stops anyone else from messing with it? How was it created? And then there are the obvious questions, why was it used against humans and why did it cause so much more damage than the monsters brought over by the Pairing?

As for Pairing, the man said it was the second and I would like to know about that. What are the causes of a Pairing and how is it decided.

Another question, were they paired with a planet of monsters or was another race using them for war? Like Lynthari on the 4th floor with the Living Tree and the Colony.

The more time passes, the more questions I have and the much shorter this floor feels.

Taking a bag off my back, I take out a brush and a container with mana conductive paint. I start drawing inscriptions on the roof after clearing it. While doing so, I check the inscriptions painted on my body and there seems to be no change from before.

Once again, I check the anchor near my disciple, and, making sure everything ok, I start using more of my mana to feed the orbs. My heart beats, and working as a medium, it turns mana into the two Primordial energies I possess.

I let two hours pass like that and then I stop feeding the orb. Instead, I create a javelin over my shoulder. Having created it with [Regalia] it's already tougher than it used to be, but I can't stop there. I make it denser, which increases its weight, either because of the skill or the properties of mana changing. I don't use [Infusion] to keep feeding the javelin with my energies or skills. No, I just make it as dense, heavy, and tough as possible. Focusing on doing that, I'm able to stop it from exploding. Thanks to my improved mastery and skill.

Feeling ready, I breathe in and out.

[Focus]

The world loses some of its color and the skill filters out some of the noises. In addition to the three orbs floating beside me, another takes form. This one is smaller and quickly fed by my focused mana as it turns black, while I keep it under control with [Mana Domain], [Mana Manipulation],

Then I activate my trait, a golden circle appearing around my pupils, while I channel mana into the inscriptions I've painted on the ground and get ready.

Moving the javelin a bit further away, I look at the sky and [Focus]. Knowing better what to look for, I identify the lines I noticed the first time. The lines of mana that likely encompass the entire planet.

The Veil.

I touch them, I examine them, trying to collect as much information as possible, already feeling the strain my trait is putting on my body.

And as expected, the monster appears.

[Veil Guardian - lvl ??]

It stands on the rooftop of the building opposite mine. Its red eyes glow with hate, and a deep growl reverberates through the air, breaking the remains of glass in the windows. The blades it has in place of its arms have a blue shine to them, and I feel its senses touch me.

Not giving it a chance, I nearly deplete the kinetic energy from the orb I created, and the javelin shoots at the guardian, boosted by all that force. A sonic boom threatens to deafen me as the javelin breaks the sound barrier and disappears from its place beside me.

It pierces through the monster's chest, barely missing the heart, and continues to fly much further, piercing through everything in its way. The javelin doesn't slow at all, the sheer density, weight, and amount of kinetic energy I used turning it into a terrifying weapon.

The Veil Guardian wobbles on its legs, and red blood seeps onto its gray skin. It roars, and the blue veins on its body expand. A gravity field encompasses me and immediately starts pushing me down to my knees with a force that tears at my body.

I fail to disrupt the effect even with my eyes activated, I've expected this ever since I first saw the monster use the skill.

Not hesitating and according to my plan, I let the black mana seep into my body, the inscriptions covering me activate and help alleviate some of the pressure. The effect of the monster's skill gets overpowered by the sheer power of black mana strengthening my body, and I watch the monster jump from the roof, heading towards me.

I send mana mixed with kinetic energy into the inscriptions on the floor, and they resonate, shooting all that energy through the skyscraper I'm standing on.

The building starts crumbling when the energy pierces through it in its entirety. One of the tallest buildings in the city starts falling to the side.

At the same time, the Veil Guardian avoids golden flames infused with disrupting mana, and it disrupts the anchors I placed all around the place.

It crashes against my barrier and breaks it, welcomed by another one which also breaks. I set barrier after barrier, slowing the monster down. Then my mana flows and surges from my body.

[Redistribution] activates, and I absorb all the kinetic energy from the falling building. Gradually, the broken skyscraper slows its fall, and things become eerily quiet as the pieces of the building slowly continue to fall.

[Redistribution - lvl 41 > Redistribution - lvl 42]

I compress thermal energy inside of the orb even more, and a stream of thermal energy shoots off like a laser.

The guardian avoids it, but it cuts another skyscraper in half, which also slows as it falls.

[Redistribution - lvl 42 > Redistribution - lvl 43]

This time I dash at the monster, using bits of that energy to strengthen my body in the way symbiotic transference used to do.

The air itself around the monster reverberates with high-pitched sounds. Wound after wound appears on the monster's skin, the kinetic energy threatening to tear apart the extremely durable monster. The sound rises pitch and volume, as its wounds deepen, and the guardian uses its arms to cover its chest and head.

Finally, the attack pierces its guard, and the right arm of the monster explodes at the shoulder, falling to the ground.

Chapter 290: Resilience Beyond Pain

Another blast of kinetic energy sends the monster crashing through multiple buildings. But it seems that I was unable to kill it, even with the sheer amount of kinetic energy I collected, it not being concentrated enough because the sheer amount is hard to control.

I grab the severed limb as it falls, and when the guardian rushes at me again, flames burst forth from me, dispersing on its skin.

The guardian disrupts my anchors, and my kinetic energy seems to be having less of an effect, the monster changing its barrier to counter it.

My control falters, and the falling buildings move again, falling at normal speed, the deafening sound of crashing debris filling the area.

I avoid the growling Veil Guardian and use [Regalia] to envelope my body in a suit of armor and absorb another blow. Mana flows through me, and I use the kinetic energy I've gathered to strengthen my body even more.

I create a sword out of mana, imbuing it with [Resonance], as it collides with the guardian's remaining sword arm.

Its blade cuts through my weapon easily as if it wasn't even there, and slices into my shoulder before I can blast it away with the remaining kinetic energy from the orb.

I absorb some thermal energy from the other orb, and the wound starts healing.

Not giving me more time, the monster reaches me, slashing at me again, and I dodge to the side, as a slash removes a chunk of the falling building we're standing on. I attack it with its own arm, and the monster dodges, a deep groan I can feel in my chest reverberating through the air. It screeches and follows me as I jump from building to building, its attacks causing huge amounts of damage to each.

It continues to disrupt my anchors, and even my [Mana Domain] is restricted. Its gravity skill also continues to put pressure on me, and I feel black mana inside of my body depleting and inscriptions on my skin disappearing.

The entire time, part of my mind, with the help of my eyes' trait, continues to examine the monster, its mana, and the way it tracks me and disrupts my external skills.

When the monster tackles me, I let it happen and use [Infusion] to infuse the armor around my body with thermal energy. Golden flames fill the armor, turning me into a burning figure, and the Veil Guardian screeches, as its skin burns and one of its eyes is damaged.

Using the opportunity, I once again slash with its severed arm, and the monster dodges once more. In exchange, its blade pierces through my leg, and the only thing that saves it is the black mana boosting my movements.

I avoid another stab and try to keep it from tackling me. Flames compress and blaze ahead like a laser, burning a hole into its eye. The attack blinds the damaged eye but still doesn't pierce deep enough to kill it.

For a short moment, gravity affecting me increases, and immobilizes me, even with my strengthened body, and the monster reaches me, burrowing its teeth into my leg.

I push it away, and another laser-like attack of golden flames burns its chest close to its heart as the monster shifts its body. The Veil Guardian takes a moment to chew on the chunk of flesh it tore out of my leg, all the while looking at me with its single eye. A memory of a group of three people being eaten alive flashes through my head.

Landing on the road, I roll away, but once again, the monster holds my body with extreme gravity and reaches me in a split second. Ignoring my armor, it burrows its teeth into the same leg it bit before, and then, while I'm unable to move, starts gnawing at it.

The gravity disappears, but the monster holds me, its teeth lodged in the bone of my shin.

It starts eating me alive, a hateful expression in its eyes.

[Redistribution] activates, and I transfer all the thermal energy I have into kinetic and bolster it with some of my mana. My thermokinetic heart beats, compressing it all.

Looking at the monster, I send all that kinetic energy into my leg, and as the monster gnaws at it, I make it explode inside its mouth. The Veil Guardian gets thrown away, a geyser of blood exploding into the air.

My leg is gone, up to the middle of my thigh, destroyed by my own attack.

I push myself back up, and I feel black mana disappear from my body, depleted as the aftereffects catch up to me.

With a deep growl, the monster stands up again, half of its face turned into a bloody mess, none of its teeth remain, as its blood drips. Yet, the monster remains combat capable, very much so.

[Tether - lvl 28 > Tether - lvl 29]

Finally, my skill pierces through the monster's attempts at disruption with the help of my eyes, and shooting a last weak attack at the monster, I teleport.

I reappear at one of my older anchors that is barely active, close to crumbling after days of staying there. With my body depleted of black mana, I finally have some mental capability to do so and create a small black orb near where I am. Leaving it behind to remove my tracks, I teleport to another anchor. I repeat it multiple times, and then inside one of the smaller buildings on the edge of the city, I fall to the floor.

Taken from Royal Road, this narrative should be reported if found on Amazon.

Thermal energy flows through my body, healing it as much as possible with the help of passive abilities and fighting against the severe aftereffects of the fight.

I examine the sword arm of the monster I still hold, but I find no markings on it, and none of the monster's mana remains in it after I disrupt it multiple times. Being separated from its owner and purged of mana, the body isn't quite so extremely durable, so I remove the flesh, leaving me with the blade.

Voidsteel Slicer (Epic): The Voidsteel used in this blade is renowned for its vibration-absorbing qualities, allowing the wielder to cut with unmatched precision and sharpness. The Voidsteel ensures the Slicer is nearly indestructible, effortlessly cutting through almost any material.

Then I glance at my leg which is missing a big chunk. The wound has already closed, and new skin covers it, and as before, when I tested it with my fingertip, the leg will grow back. Given enough time and enough thermal energy, my passive will be able to restore it.

Once again, I create a prosthetic made of dark blue mana connected to the stump of my leg. Part of [Focus] shifts to keeping it up and controlling it, and I try to rotate the ankle, and it moves as a normal leg should.

[Perception] warns me, and I try to teleport, but my [Tether] fails, disrupted. Instead, I create a spherical barrier around me, and crashing through the wall, a blade slashes through it, stopped only by the Voidsteel Slicer in my hand. The sheer force of the attack still sends me crashing through the wall and outside onto the street.

With a deep growl, the Void Guardian lands on the road. The monster's movements are more careful than before, and it doesn't rush to attack. One of its arms is still missing, the blade held by me. There is

still a hole through its chest caused by my first attack. Its skin is burned, and one of its eyes is blinded, with its face bearing deep wounds and jawbone gone.

It moves much quicker than I do, and I barely block the next attack.

The blades meet, and I absorb some kinetic energy from the blow, and then my trait activates again. The world of invisible mana opens up again, and I feel the strain on my brain. Even more now without black mana strengthening my body.

Ignoring it, I push through, disrupt the attempts that stop me from teleporting, and then use [Tether], teleporting to one of the anchors I left near where the first fight started.

My body sways, and I deactivate my trait. I feel blood in my mouth, and the prosthetic leg flickers and nearly disappears before I force myself to keep it up. Using the strength of my body, I start running in between the skyscrapers on the road covered in greenery. I use [Resonance] and strengthen my Mantle, keeping as much mana as I can inside my body.

[Resonance - lvl 41 > Resonance - lvl 42]

I enter one of the buildings near the fallen skyscraper and force myself to calm down.

My breathing slows down, and I absorb the movement of my heart, making the beating slow. The Mantle encompasses it all, and [Resonance] disrupts the tiniest particles of mana that escape my Mana Cycling. I disrupt the leg made of mana too. Lastly, I control the heat of my body as well, matching it to the rubble surrounding me.

From the sky, the monster falls, a crater created by the force of the impact. The silence is deafening as the Veil Guardian reaches the place where I appeared after the teleport. Its red eye looks around, full of calm hate and searching.

There are only two anchors left. One near my disciple and the other one near the old healer on the rooftop with the Vitalist.

The monster takes a few slow steps, searching, and looking. Its movements are just as sharp as before, even with the wounds I've inflicted.

A minute passes.

Two minutes pass.

The Guardian passes by the building I'm hiding in.

Three minutes.

It returns again, circles, and searches closer to the area where I am. The remaining arm twitches towards the ruins of the buildings where it all started, some of my mana still lingering in the air. After being hit by the attack, the cleanly slashed stone falls, adding to the pile of rubble.

Then the Veil Guardian changes its strategy. The monster stops where it stands, and mana explodes from it, encompassing a huge area. Some sort of domain similar to my [Mana Domain].

Within that sizable area, the gravity increases. And then again. The gravity keeps slowly increasing every few seconds. It causes more rubble to fall, and some weaker buildings tilt and crack. The smaller pieces of the skyscrapers fall from all this height. And the entire time, the monster waits. For a hint of mana. For a scream of pain.

The gravity increases even more, and another skyscraper nearby tilts, standing only on one leg, I crumple onto the ground under that force. I do not fight against it; I do not use mana other than to keep myself covered.

[Focus - lvl 44 > Focus - lvl 45]

The effect of the field isn't as strong as before because of the area it covers, yet it still weighs me down. It becomes harder to breathe, and I feel dizzy. The blood in my veins moves slower.

The field strengthens, and with it, my dizziness strengthens too. I can feel my heart palpitate. The guardian radiates more mana, and each breath takes extreme effort. Yet, I still do not use my mana to strengthen my body. I keep it all under control, not leaking it at all, not even a bit.

[Mana Manipulation - lvl 45 > Mana Manipulation - lvl 46]

My vision blurs and my body starts to tear. The intense gravity attempting to pull the flesh off my bones.

Bones all over my body crack and break. Dozens of them as my body gets pressed against the ground. The pain pierces through my body and reaches my mind.

There is nothing else, just a feeling of my body getting taken apart, the pain, and me controlling my mana. It feels like forever, and I barely even feel a few pieces of ceiling fall on my body, even though they mangle my muscles and break even more bones.

Out of nowhere, the pressure disappears, replaced by a deep groan, and then there is silence. The gravity is back to normal, and gradually even the sound of falling buildings disappears.

Even then, I lay there for hours. I do not heal my body, nor do I stop keeping my mana hidden. I just lay there, inside the half-broken building, somewhere under the rubble.

Only when I hear the rain falling outside do I allow my heart to generate thermal energy and let it activate the passive that heals my body.